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ABSTRACT

Characteristics of the foreign language teacher, student, and classroom are compared with corresponding characteristics of the music teacher, student, and classroom to suggest parallels between the two disciplines. It is suggested that second language learning would be enhanced by adopting some techniques of music instruction, such as warming up (with the foreign language as with instruments), visualization of a successful end product (fluency in the second language without recourse to English), practice geared toward a complete and accurate performance (rather than intermittent performance, as on many objective tests), grading based on enthusiastic participation, emphasis on development of a sense of linguistic rhythm, and encouragement in using language laboratories to their fullest potential by constant practice (rather than simply waiting for taped cues). Cooperation between the two disciplines is valid because both offer not only the potential for performance, but also the possibility for mastery, a sense of history, and appreciation of culture. (MSE)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE STUDY OF MUSIC

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It has been my personal experience that many students who are involved with music seem to have an advantage when it comes to dealing with foreign languages. The reason for this, one assumes, is that since both music and foreign languages deal with sounds, making the transfer from one discipline to the other is fairly easy. Many other foreign language teachers will no doubt concur. But I should like to compare a foreign language student, teacher and classroom to a music student, teacher and classroom and suggest that there are more parallels between these two disciplines than might be evident at the outset.

When I think of a music classroom, I think of the large room where a concert band or an orchestra rehearses. The students arrive from their other classes and although they may do some talking, they do not wait to be told to get their instruments out of their cases, find their music folders and begin warming up. Everyone just knows that this is what is done. How silly it would be if no one did anything musical until the band director called the band to order and told them to pull out their instruments. Nor would he ever think of asking the group to play a selection without first having everyone do some "warming-up" exercises of some kind. The band rehearsal begins, then, for each individual member, not when the director finally calls the group to order, but rather the moment the band member begins to "fiddle" with his instrument. Since time is of the essence, it is important that students arrive at the rehearsal room as soon as possible after their previous class and begin their warm-up exercises.

I contend that a foreign language classroom is similar to an orchestra

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rehearsal. The foreign language teacher is really powerless to begin "teaching the language" until each student has placed himself in a frame of mind receptive to that teaching. This requires that the student warm up, or in other words that he come to the classroom as soon as possible, take his "instrument" out of its "case" (his knowledge of the language) and begin using it (that is, begin actively SPEAKING). Students who comply with my request to arrive early in class if at all possible and to begin speaking the language immediately, make it immeasurably easier for me to accomplish my objectives of helping those students acquire the foreign language The reason for this is that the student must CONSCIOUSLY turn his mind to the foreign language and begin to concentrate on the language, if he is to acquire it and begin to think in it, if he is to become fluent. No one else can do that for him! What a waste it is to allow our students to sit waiting for class to begin, SPEAKING IN ENGLISH! No orchestra or band director would tolerate such conduct, I am sure.

I have sung in several choral groups in which the director has said time and again that "the key to good singing is thinking! You have to imagine a beautiful and musical tone before you can produce a musical sound. You have to conceptualize yourself as a good singer before you can become one." Such a statement would suggest that the production of music is not only a matter of technical proficiency, but also that it is a platonic (cerebral!) activity, requiring concentration and WILL! By the same token, to become proficient in a foreign language requires that we visualize ourselves using the language with ease and proficiency. We have to make a concentrated mental effort to think, visualize, imagine, yea cogitate in the target language, to the exclusion of English. We must decide. . .with conviction. . .that we WILL communicate through the medium of the target language (or through the music,

if we are singing or playing). Teachers may have to remind students often to make use of this idea of WILLing to use the foreign language

"I took four years of French, German or Spanish, and now, four years later, I can't speak a word." How often have we heard those words? How many times have we heard someone say, "I took piano or violin for four years, but now I can't play a note." Speaking a foreign language is like playing a musical instrument: it takes great effort and concentrated desire, to acquire a skill in the discipline. Music and foreign languages are not like lecture classes, or classes in which one reads a book and takes a test. Rather, music and foreign languages are disciplines in which performance is the ultimate test of proficiency. An orchestra or a musician rehearses and rehearses the music for one principle reason: the performance(s). Similarly, one studies a foreign language in order to be able to perform in that language. Anything less than a good performance is an indication that one has not practiced enough, no matter what one's intentions might have been. A good performance may occur after only a few hours of study; I recently attended a recital presented by children who had studied beginning violin under the Suzuki method for only seven weeks (a total of 14 hours). I was impressed. Many of these students will continue and a very few will become quite good. But without making the concentrated effort, they will forget what they learned. Given a SMALL enough amount of material to assimilate, a student can feel success SOON after beginning to study, be that a musical selection or a foreign language. The important thing is that the student PERFORM as soon as possible towards oral performance, rather than towards written fill-in-the-blank or verb conjugation tests. I cannot imagine a recital in which the piano teacher would play 75% of the notes while the student would fill in the blanks at

given intervals or simply recite the names of the notes instead of playing a tune.

How does a band or orchestra or choral director give final grades to his class? The great majority of the time, high grades are given to those people who hold the "first chair" position. But fairly high grades are also usually given to many other students as long as they display a good attitude. Students who are afraid to play or sing their part, either because they are too shy or because they know they will make errors, having failed to rehearse at home, usually receive the lower grades. And of course, students who are frequently absent must receive failing grades, because they fail to integrate themselves into the "mini-society" of the musical ensemble. In most classes where lecturing is the dominant activity, such as history, math or the sciences, it is the quiet student who is the good student. But in music, it is the student who participates with enthusiasm who is the good student. Obviously, if that student is constantly talking or drawing attention away from the music, he is not a good student, no matter how well he may play his instrument. The point is, however, that the student's grade is almost never reflected by his performance at the recital or concert, but rather by his day-to-day performance, enthusiasm, and willingness to be a musician. This is extremely difficult for a band director to quantify. Hence grades in such music classes are very seldom as objective as they might be in a class in which one's principle activity consists of taking down lecture notes, reading a textbook and taking two to four exams. In the foreign language classroom, the student's willingness to consider himself a "speaker of the foreign language" must inevitably play an important role in the grade he ultimately receives.

Once a student who had been absent much of the semester came to me and asked if he could salvage a passing grade if he took the final exam; I told him no. I explained that in most classes, especially those of the professional schools, such as business, or in the sciences, a final test is indeed significant. But foreign languages are not sciences. They are humanistic studies, in which not only cerebral knowledge but also personal development are at issue. Foreign languages belong to that area of study called the arts, and are more closely aligned to music than to economics. It is the day-to-day effort that makes a difference in foreign language learning. To say that all a person has to do is to take one final exam in order to receive credit for a foreign language is, to my mind, contrary to the central purpose of foreign language learning, because it suggests that one should study the material not for the purpose of communicating, but rather only for the purpose of passing one big final exam.

It is interesting to note the way an experienced music teacher approaches his task. While many lay people might think that the most important aspect of music is to play the notes correctly, the best music teachers take a strong interest in laying in their students' minds a solid foundation of the concept of rhythm. Some students lose patience when, after several hours or days of instruction on rhythm, they still have not learned to play a tune. But those who persevere discover eventually the wisdom of acquiring the ability to sight-read the rhythm of any piece of music at first glance. Rather than wasting valuable time and effort trying to figure out the rhythm of each new piece, they apply the general rules of rhythm to each new selection with ease and confidence. Rene Descartes suggested that in order to understand a principle, it was best to break it down into its component parts. Our students progress much faster when they learn thoroughly to deal with the

basic unit of communication, i.e., pronunciation, by acquiring a solid knowledge of the relationship of the written word to the sound of the word in the target language. My experience has convinced me that many students can learn to pronounce with complete confidence a very large number of words in the target language, including many words they have never before seen, if we as teachers will take the time to emphasize the fundamental concept of sound-symbol correlation, i,e., the relationship of the letters or groups of letters to the sounds they represent in the target language. This emphasis on the phonetic system of the target language is similar to the emphasis the seasoned music teacher places upon learning to deal with rhythm: it reflects the philosophy that one does better to build a very strong foundation before trying to add the superstructure of the knowledge we want our students to acquire.

If the reader will allow, I will carry my extended simile even to the foreign language laboratory. Some students never profit from the language laboratory the way they should because they approach the lab in the wrong way. Many of them find this activity extremely boring. This is because they spend most of their time waiting, waiting, waiting for the cue from the tape. But if the student approaches the laboratory drill as would a music student studying scales and arpeggios, (and this requires that the teacher explain to the student the more effective way of using the lab as given in the next four sentences) he will obtain much more benefit from the lab and at the same time avoid those "blahs" so frequently associated with the lab. A music student must drill scales over and over again; he plays or sings arpeggios with the idea in mind of acquiring the fluid movement associated with artistic performance. In the language lab, the student should not repeat the example just once; rather, he should be speaking almost all the time. Between each

cue he can, if he has prepared for the lab, repeat each expression twice, three, perhaps even four or five times. THIS activity, which closely resembles that of a musician running up and down a scale four or five times, is truly efficient laboratory practice, and when the student participates in it, he has absolutely no time in which to fall asleep, because he is CONSTANTLY active.

Foreign language study, it has been claimed, is one of the most "liberalizing" studies in which one may engage. Several reasons have been given for this. The serious student comes to see life from a broader perspective, and he learns how to reproduce "reality" or "a reality" in terms of a communications system formally inaccessible to him. In addition, anyone who studies a foreign language cannot avoid being exposed to aspects of the great civilizations of the past (i.e., to the history of the country in question). Music is generally considered one of the "fine arts" rather than one of the "liberal arts." But here again, a comparison suggests itself. Music, like language, seeks to communicate "reality". Learning to manipulate the instrument so that it produces beauty teaches the musician a great deal about himself, much more than merely reading about music will ever do. And a serious study of music inevitably leads one past playing and/or singing "popular" music (i.e., contemporary culture) and into contact with the great civilizations of the past, as a result of working with the masterpieces by Bach, Beethoven, Debussy, Vivaldi, etc. Why study music? Why study foreign languages? In order to be able to SPEAK or PLAY the instrument? Yes, but also in order to gain that maitrise de soi that comes from making a serious commitment to a goal. And certainly not less important, in order to gain a sense of history and high culture.

I sincerely believe that foreign language teachers and music teachers have a great deal in common and that we can learn from each other, not so much about the technical aspects of our disciplines, but a mind-set which will help us improve our teaching, our testing, our grading, the goals we set, even our use of the laboratory, and produce the kinds of artists, in broadest possible sense that word connotes, of which we can be proud.